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ABSTRACT

This document summarizes a doctoral dissertation that examined activities in school libraries, including educational and leisure activities. The research focused on how pupils in two senior high schools in Norway use the school library in their everyday life at school, who the users are, and what use of the library means to them. The focus was limited to the pupils' activities in the school library as a room. In this room, the question of use was not limited to what the pupils should or can do, but what they do in practice. This summary first gives some brief information on the school library situation in Norway. The next sections cover the methodology and theoretical framework of the study. The last section discusses the following main findings: (1) few pupils, regardless of gender, used the school libraries; (2) leisure related activities were equal to educationally related use; (3) book loan was low, and use of computers high; (4) pupils occupied the room both physically and in deciding what sort of activities to perform there; and (5) the school library was a meeting place for social activities. (Contains 11 references.) (MES)

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A Place to Learn or a Place for Pleasure? Pupils' Uses of the School Library in Norway

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A PLACE TO LEARN OR A PLACE FOR PLEASURE?

Pupils' uses of the school library in Norway

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Introduction

Much research into school libraries has investigated how pupils use it intentionally for school work, (Limberg 1998, Pitts 1994, Kuhlthau 1993), for reading (Dressman 1996) or for seeking information. Research has not been limited to the electronic or printed texts in the school libraries or the use of the room itself (Limberg 2002).

The research work in my Ph.D. dissertation (Rafste 2001) has a broad approach, involving all sorts of activities in the school libraries, educationally related and leisure activities. It focuses on how pupils use the school library in their everyday life at school, who the users are, and what use of it means to them. The focus is limited to the pupils' activities in the school library as a room. In this room, the question of use is not limited to what the pupils should or can do, but what they do in practice. In these ways, the study differs from most other research work conducted in this area, also in the way that it is taking the pupil's perspective into account.

The outline of this presentation will first give some brief information on the school library situation in Norway. The next sections will be devoted to the methodological and theoretical questions. The last section will present the main findings and discuss these briefly.

School libraries in Norway

Legislation and standards of school libraries in Norway and the other Scandinavian countries differ in some ways from those in the United States and in Great Britain (Knuth 1995). According to "Opplæringsloven" (Norwegian Educational Law, 1998) all schools must have a library in school. If not, they should have access to a close public library. For schools with pupils aged 6-16, the local council is responsible for the standard of rooms, materials and services. For schools with pupils aged 16-19, the county council is responsible. This means that how these libraries' functions vary (*Skolebiblioteket i grunnskolen - en kartlegging 1997 [The school library for pupils aged 6-16: a documentation of key features*]), and we have not up to now had any research on how the school libraries in senior high schools are used by the pupils in practice.

There are guidelines as to what functions the school libraries *should* have, and the part of the National Curriculum that applies to primary schools (pupils aged 6-12), junior-high schools (pupils aged 13 - 15) and senior-high schools (pupils aged 16 to 19) clearly underlines the educational use. There is, however, a long and strong tradition for cultural use of the school libraries as well. This cultural use is, however, mainly limited to the pupils' book loans for out-of-school reading.

Methodology for studying the pupils' use and value of their use of the school library

A qualitative research design was developed to explore the following research questions:

- Which pupils use the school library?
- How do these pupils use the school library?
- What does the school library mean for these pupils?

The approach is ethnographically oriented in the sense that there has been detailed, current recording of everyday life in the school libraries and other fieldwork in the schools carried out over six months. The main research methods were observations and interviews.

Two senior-high schools (catering for pupils aged 16-19) are used as case studies. Both schools have academic and vocational classes. The schools differ in terms of number of pupils, and the school libraries are different in terms of physical size and budget, as well as in number of personal computers per pupil.

The informants in the in-depth interviews were mainly pupils, but also teachers, school librarians and deputy head teachers. The interviews with the pupils were conducted mainly to obtain information about how they valued the school library, but also to serve as a control for the observations in the school libraries and the interpretation of these observations.

One of the Year 1 classes in each school had a special focus: observations were conducted not only in the school libraries, but also in the classrooms. These were carried out to obtain information about the way the teachers organised their teaching. To know if and how they integrated the school library in their teaching, was of special interest. Furthermore, classroom observation yielded information about pupils' behaviour and learning in the classroom as

opposed to the school library. The observations in the school libraries tried to cover all the pupils who visited them.

Theoretical framework

The research design also includes the use of theory, but not theory as a predefined model *before* the fieldwork started. Theory and the theoretical framework have been developed alongside the data analysis. The approach is not a narrow educational one, based on official government documents. Nor is it orientated towards a library and information science perspective. It is more orientated towards broader and general sociological perspectives, and has been chosen strategically, based on the empirical material. This approach has made it possible to 'catch' and interpret the pupils' ways of using the school library, regardless of whether this usage was related to schoolwork, to leisure activities, to meeting friends, or to all these.

The over-arching theoretical perspective is socialisation. The interest is in how and to what extent pupils are socialised into using the school library. Bernstein's (1971) code theory, particularly the concepts *collection code* and *integrating code*, is used in data analysis. The theory explains how codes express views of knowledge as 'given' versus 'constructed'.

Anthony Giddens' theory of structuration (Giddens 1984) is particularly important in the study. The focus here is on understanding people's actions and social institutions. It is a theory of how structures in society are created, maintained, and developed through production and reproduction of people's actions through time and space. People's agency and social structure both play a part in making society. The school library is an example of a micro social structure within a bigger social structure: the school.

Giddens' use of the concepts of *time* and *space* in social systems is helpful in interpreting the use of the school library as a particular *locale* in the school as an institution. A *locale* is neither a physical room nor a place, nor people's agency in the room. It is the interaction between the physical room and artefacts, and the people there. A *locale* can have different regions. After E. Goffman, Giddens uses front regions and back regions as concepts describing spaces of different contextuality. In school, the classroom is an example of a front region: a space where the pupils' activities are watched and directed by a teacher. This is a region of little freedom in the pupils' choice of how to act, who to work with, talk to, which

activities to choose and where to sit. The school library is an example of a back region. This region permits wider discretion for pupils to regulate their own actions, especially when the teachers do not integrate the use of it in their teaching. The pupils' choice of activities can be broad or narrow, they can sit alone or with other pupils, they can meet pupils from different classes etc. Using Giddens' concepts of space in understanding the way pupils use the school library, helps one to unveil the school library as a social system operating within a different parameter than the school and classrooms.

Findings and discussion

The main findings, including a brief explanation and/or interpretation, are:

1. **Few pupils, regardless of gender, used the school libraries**

Few pupils used the school libraries as part of their daily life at school. The pupils in the schools researched were aged from 16 to 19. Pupils in Years 11 and 12 (aged 16-17) used the school libraries the least, with pupils in Year 13 (aged 18-19) using it the most. There were differences between the two schools as to which classes used it more, the academic or the vocational classes.

The fact that only about 30 - 40 pupils of many hundreds were regular users, is explained by the way the teaching in both schools - although different in many ways - was organised. The teachers did not integrate the school library as a resource centre for teaching aids and learning. However, according to the school librarian, teachers have a crucial role in relation to pupils' use of library facilities:

"The single most important thing to get the pupils to the school library, is the teacher. It is the teacher's attitude to libraries and use of them, that is evident..."

The teachers did not see it as part of their job to integrate the school library in their teaching. Using the library was in their opinion an issue between the pupils and the school librarian.

2. Leisure related activities equal to educationally related use

The pupils used the school libraries as much for leisure activities as for educationally related activities. The most popular leisure activities were meeting other pupils for chatting, and reading newspapers. Doing homework was the most used educationally related activity. The

school libraries were used more for working with textbooks that the pupils brought to the libraries than for searching and using information in the libraries. According to the pupils and their teachers, using textbooks were enough to obtain good marks, except when doing project work.

3. Book loan is low, use of PCs high

The traditional use of the school libraries has been book loans for leisure activity outside school. This study indicates that pupils - regardless of gender - spend little time on reading for pleasure. It seems that the use of PCs has taken over the previous importance of book loans. Private chatting and e-mails are the preferred activities if the pupils can choose how to use the PCs. According to the findings, there are gender differences in using PCs for leisure activities, but less differences for educational activities. The boys are far more active PC users than the girls.

4. "Occupation" of the school library

The pupils who used the school libraries daily, "occupied" the room or part of it, not only physically, but also in deciding what sort of activities to perform there. This was a phenomenon observed at both schools, but the occupying groups were different. In one of the schools the IB classes (international baccalaureate) were the occupants, and were of both gender. In the other school, students from some of the vocational classes were the occupants, and only boys. The occupants decided the standard of use, and it was difficult for those not following these standards to find space for activities they would like to do, or were meant to do.

How is this "occupation" possible? The phenomenon can be related to Giddens' theory of structuration and the understanding of the school library as a social system against this background. The school library is a room with less rules and sanctions than the classroom, and can be regarded as a gray zone between the classroom and the schoolyard. It gives the pupils who are familiar with the system an opportunity to form their own *locale*. In the study, the concept of *a porous room* has been developed to characterize this gray zone.

5. The school library: a meeting -place for social activities.

Most of the users regarded the school library as a necessity in school, in case they had tasks to do that afforded use of different learning aids. Not everyone asked had ever used it. But it was

as a meeting-place for social activities that the room was most highly appreciated, and that by the everyday users. As one of the informants expressed it:

"*...but socially - it would have been daft not to have a place to meet friends to sit and chat - or eat [...] And it is important, isn't it, to maintain friendships - to know what is going on in their lives - and not only do school work*"

Other informants emphasised the advantage of the school library as a room where pupils from different classes could meet.

School libraries are often comfortable and well designed. This makes the room a favourite place for pupils to meet (Skantze 1989). But at the same time it raises the question as to whether other spaces in school than the library should be developed as social meeting-places.

Conclusion

The empirical and theoretical perspectives in this study have helped the author to describe and understand the everyday use by pupils of the school library, and how they value it. Hopefully, I have added to the research in the field, especially in educational settings. I think that more research is needed, both in Norway and in other countries.

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